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SUBJECT: Religious Minorities in Iran: From the Privately Content and Publicly Cautious to the Persecuted

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a continuation of Embassy Ankara's vignette reporting based on interesting insights from Iranian visa applicants, we interviewed a number of Iranians recently from various religious minorities in Iran, including from the Jewish, Armenian, Baha'i and Zoroastrian communities, as well as a convert to Christianity. The Iranian Jews and Armenian-Christian applicants told us that as long as they act prudently and keep a low profile, they can lead quietly successful lives in Iran. On the other hand, members of the Baha'i and Zoroastrian faiths face employment challenges, while converts from Islam to Christianity face brutal government persecution if their conversions become publicly known. End Summary.

Iranian Jews: Low Profile Allows for "normal" life

¶2. (SBU) In the course of several immigrant visa interviews conducted with members of Iran's Jewish community, they painted an overall positive picture of their living condition in Iran, albeit in part due to their prudence with official matters. All of the Jewish applicants were employed in business professions such as in textiles and merchandise sales. Multiple Jewish businessmen noted that they were professionally successful, financially well off, and lived relatively normal lives among the Iranian community as a whole. At the same time, two Jewish businessmen mentioned that they had to be extra cautious not to make even the slightest mistake in violation of any laws or regulations, or risk exposing themselves to disproportional scrutiny and harassment. Further, one applicant feared the Jewish community would become an easy target for retribution for what he believed would be a likely Israeli attack this year against Iran's nuclear program. He explained this fear was one of his reasons for deciding to immigrate to the United States.

Iranian Armenians claim Positive Treatment

¶3. (SBU) Every applicant from Iran's Armenian minority described positive and in some cases excellent living conditions and treatment at all levels. One professional Armenian applicant claimed conditions in Iran were better for that community than in Armenia. She explained that in Iran, Armenians are considered by the regime and the general public to be a more trustworthy group than the majority Muslim population and even other Christian groups. For example, she noted that Armenian mechanics and merchants are noted by most Iranians as being more honest and therefore attract more business. Consequently, she described the Armenian community as being very affluent compared to other Iranians. She further said that Armenians were treated noticeably better than Muslims "on the street" in terms of kindness shown by the community. Also noteworthy is that she mentioned that Iranian Armenians pay the same taxes and do the same military service as their Muslim counterparts.

Baha'i and Zoroastrians face more scrutiny

¶4. (SBU) Anecdotes about living conditions from the Iranian Baha'i and Zoroastrian applicants tended to be more mixed. Baha'i applicants -- not part of a recognized minority community in Iran

--all claimed, to our surprise, that their lives in Iran were content and relatively free from government interference but they did not seem as positive about their situation there as Jewish and Armenian applicants. Indeed, some complained of difficulties finding work due to their religious convictions. For example, they explained that they were prohibited from government work including military service. Most tended to be self-employed and explained that self-employment, and keeping a low public-profile, was usually the best option for them to lead tolerable lives due to both government and general community wide disapproval of them. Zoroastrian applicants were slightly more positive about their situation in that they said they lived comfortably in Iran and were generally accepted by the community. Many Zoroastrians proudly presented cards which identified them as members of the Zoroastrian community - a recognized minority group. On the other hand, they also seemed to face some issues with employment.

Christian Converts face Daunting Conditions

15. (SBU) A female Iranian convert to Christianity described to us how she and other converts face daunting conditions. During her IV interview the applicant explained that fifteen years ago, due to her conversion to Christianity, she and her previous husband were taken to a prison in Sari in Mazandaran Province. They were immediately separated and taken into solitary confinement in the basement of the prison. Her husband was physically and psychologically tortured while she was primarily psychologically tortured, but also was "slapped in the face."

16. (SBU) She noted that the authorities were trying to break down their spirits so they would renounce their conversion. The

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interrogators kept asking why she converted, to which she replied it was a matter of faith. They responded with more psychological and light physical torture such as keeping them in the dark, as well as making them lean against walls without being able to sit down for long durations of time. After 45 days they were released, but they were not allowed to leave Sari.

17. (SBU) Eventually they were authorized to leave for her husband's hometown, but en route they got into a terrible accident with a large bus in which her husband was killed and another relative had major injuries to her jaw. Although she would not implicate the government with absolute certainty, many friends and relatives believe the accident was caused by authorities in an effort to get rid of them. After the accident, she was permitted to return to her hometown under condition that she would not have any public Christian activities. From that point on she formed her own secret home church based on the New Testament, through which many family members secretly converted. During the interview with CONOFF, she seemed genuinely concerned for their safety in Iran.

18. (SBU) Comment: These accounts from the visa applicants, though anecdotal, all supported the same conclusion: that for some religious minorities living in Iran, one necessary condition for living a "normal" Iranian life is to maintain a low public profile and adhere carefully to the regime's social standards and legal regulations. For some minorities - like the Armenians we spoke to - this approach appeared to allow for a decent life, while for others - like the Baha'i and converts from Islam to Christianity - even keeping a low profile is not always enough to avoid scrutiny, discrimination, and, for some, intense pressure.

Jeffrey